

## Thematic Session

Topics: Variation, Language attitudes, Identity

Keywords: social meaning, perception, experimental methods

### Experimental methods in the study of social meaning

Nicolai Phrao, Marie Maegaard LANCHART, University of Copenhagen

There is a growing interest in the experimental study of perceptions of speech variation. While there is a long tradition for language attitude studies (Garrett 2010), the widespread use of the matched guise technique (Lambert et al. 1960) has for the most part focused on global properties of speech variation like “accent”, “dialect” or “language”. The recent decade has seen an increase in the sophistication of experimental techniques used to explore the perception of finer details in speech variation with most studies focusing on a particular sociolinguistic variable which has been found in production studies to correlate with particular groups of people or, from another perspective, in constructions of particular personae or stances (Campbell-Kibler 2009, Labov et al. 2006). In addition to these studies a growing body of work has shown that social categories themselves may influence the perception of linguistic variants, when they are invoked in the experimental setting (Niedzielski 1999, Hay & Drager 2010).

The development of the technical possibilities for manipulating smaller segments of speech, such as specific variants, has given new insights into the relationship between individual variants, clusters of variants, and social meaning. A focus of this thematic session will be how the relationship between variant and linguistic context can be conceptualized given the growing body of evidence that subtle manipulations of linguistic content can alter social perceptions. Furthermore, the studies that show a link between the social context and linguistic perception stresses the importance of listeners’ interpretation of the speech situation for their interpretation of the variation. Together these strands of research within sociolinguistics show us that new knowledge of the social meaning potentials of linguistic variants can be gathered by using controlled data manipulation in perceptual experiments, whether we are manipulating the speech or the situation.

For this thematic session we invite papers that focus on the investigation of how patterns of sociolinguistic variation are perceived and given social meaning by language users.

Discussion questions:

How does the social context influence the perception of variants?

How does the linguistic context influence the social meaning potential of variants?

How can we study clusters of variants to gain a better understanding of the perception of sociolinguistic style(s)?

References:

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